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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000549

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECIN](#) [IN](#) [ASEAN](#)

SUBJECT: INDIA ON EAST ASIA SUMMIT: NOT WITHOUT ME

REF: A. SINGAPORE 148

[B](#). 04 STATE 275091

[C](#). 04 NEW DELHI 8051

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt. Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Following the November 2004 ASEAN Plus One Summit in Vientiane, the MEA scoffed at the idea of an East Asia Summit, but a recent conversation with MEA Joint Secretary (Southeast Asia Two) Biren Nanda indicates India

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has shifted from that position. It now appears that India, if invited, would welcome the opportunity to participate. The Singapore High Commission has told us that India has not made a concerted effort to secure an invitation, which may reflect what one New Delhi foreign policy expert describes as the GOI's perception that Southeast Asia wants India's presence in the region as a balance to China. End Summary.

India Changes Its Mind  
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[1](#)2. (C) In a January 14 meeting with PolCouns and Poloff, the MEA's Biren Nanda avoided a detailed discussion of the East Asia Summit (EAS), but his quiet insistence that India's participation was up to the ASEAN members was in sharp contrast to his colleague, Joint Secretary (Southeast Asia One) Mitra Vashishta's (protect) vehement dismissal of the Summit in December (ref C). Whereas Vashishta argued that the EAS would be "a waste of time," telling PolCouns that one of the GOI's objectives in Vientiane was to make New Delhi's position known, Nanda said India was interested in closer ties with ASEAN, and would be happy to participate in an EAS if invited. Disguising his earlier enthusiasm, later in the conversation Nanda reiterated that India's invitation to the EAS was ASEAN's decision to make, adding that "we have engagement through ASEAN Plus One."

New Delhi's Not Trying Very Hard  
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[1](#)3. (C) Singapore High Commission First Secretary Edmund Chia told Poloff on January 20 that if India is not included in the first EAS, it will not be possible to have New Delhi participate for a long time. The majority inclination in ASEAN right now, he continued, is not to invite India, adding that Singapore does support bringing in the GOI, as reported in ref A. Part of the problem, Chia remarked, is that New Delhi is not trying very hard. He characterized New Delhi's foreign policy attitude as more focused on the larger countries and regions, particularly, the US, the EU, and sometimes China. Therefore, no one in the GOI really pays attention to Southeast or East Asia until the Foreign Minister is about to take a trip. While India would probably like to be included in the EAS, Chia observed, he has seen no GOI lobbying for it.

They Really Like Us  
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[1](#)4. (C) In December, the MEA's Vashishta commented to PolCouns that "Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand are all on our side, because of the magic of the PM." Capturing that attitude, Jawarhalal Nehru University Professor of East Asian Studies Manmohini Kaul remarked to Poloff recently on Southeast Asia's view of New Delhi, "India is wanted in the region, but the question is, how keen is India?" New Delhi is still "preoccupied" with South Asia as an area of immediate and ongoing concern, she noted, explaining that India is more comfortable with South Asian groupings where India is "in the driver's seat" than it is in the more diverse and competitive ASEAN milieu. On the GOI's East Asia policy, Kaul, who is also on a kitchen cabinet of advisors to the Indian Foreign Secretary, pointed out that India does want to play a larger role, but is not "executing" the way China has.

Comment  
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[1](#)5. (C) With the assumption in the Foreign Ministry that the invitation is in the mail, GOI opposition to the EAS seems to have vanished. As we had suspected, GOI opposition to the EAS was rooted in a fear of being left out, more than concerns about redundancy with ASEAN Plus Three. In contrast

to the MEA attitude at the Laos Summit, Nanda's recent comments ("it's up to ASEAN") reflect the non-proactive position Singapore has observed. India appears unwilling to make the effort to secure a seat at the EAS, but will certainly take notice if not invited, as is the case with the GOI's lingering unhappiness at not being involved with APEC.

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